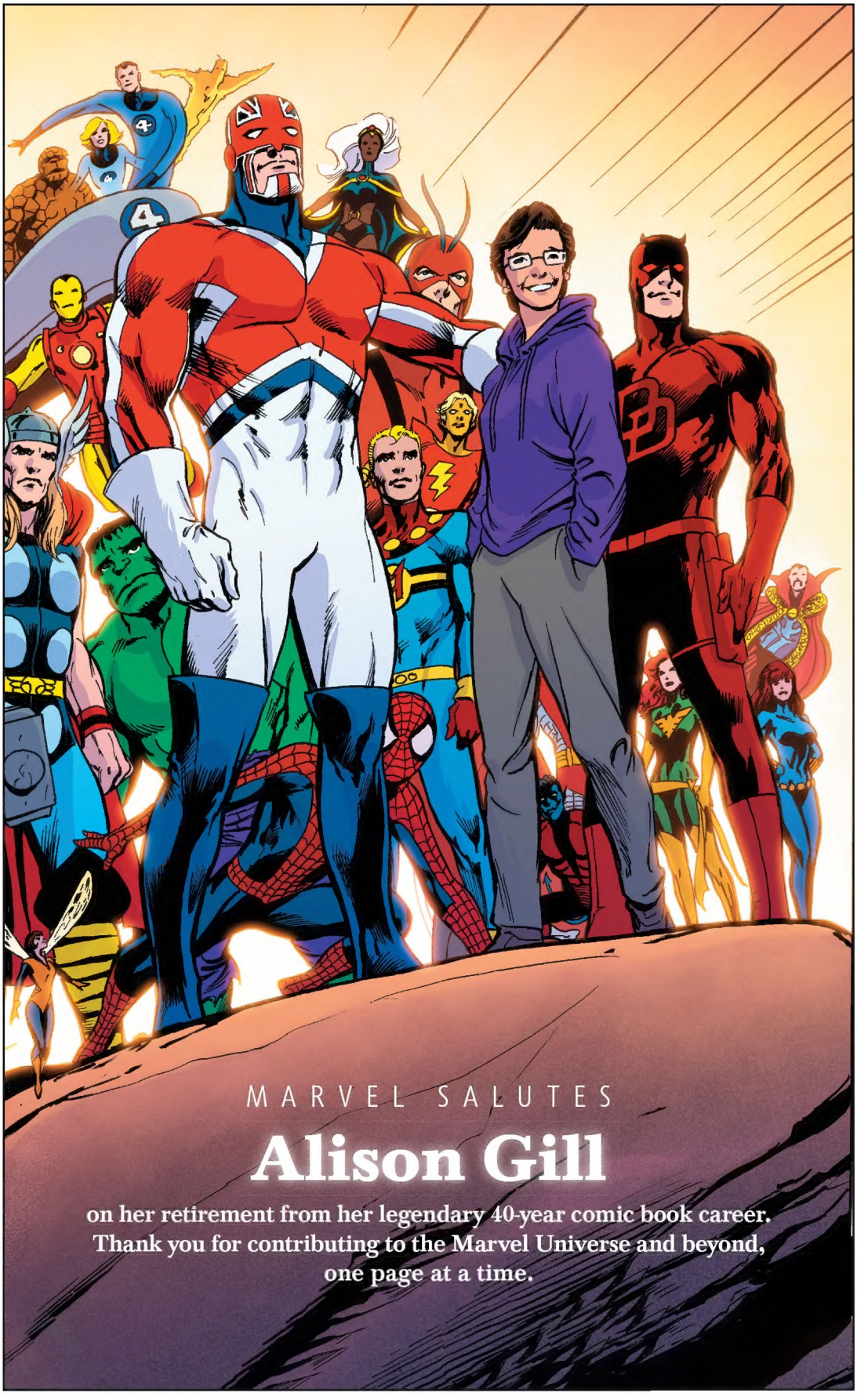
FANTASTIC
FOUR
MARVEL
15
LGY#708
NORTH
FIORELLI
ABURTOV


MARVEL SALUTES
Alison Gill
on her retirement from her legendary 40-year comic book career.
Thank you for contributing to the Marvel Universe and beyond,
one page at a time.

Here they are...

Together, they are the

FANTASTIC FOUR

& ALICIA MASTERS-GRIMM

When the Baxter Building was attacked by a horde of invaders from the Negative Zone, Mr. Fantastic shunted it and the surrounding city block into a temporal pocket for protection. Among the displaced are both of the Thing and Alicia's children, as well as Franklin and Valeria Richards. But now that a year has passed, everyone contained within the block is due to finally return.

When the FF arrived at the site of the former Baxter Building, they found it had become a construction site being worked on by civilians directed there by the Metamind app. They sought out the app's creator, Dan Passi, who revealed that Metamind was actually a probability predictor that he was using to manipulate the future to his advantage. Mr. Fantastic then disabled the app, and the Human Torch destroyed the servers, ending Passi's scheme. But when the FF returned to the Baxter Building site once more, their loved ones failed to rematerialize as planned...

"THE CHINA BRAIN"

writer: RYAN NORTH
artist: IVAN FIORELLI
color artist: JESUS ABURTOV
letterer: VC's JOE CARAMAGNA

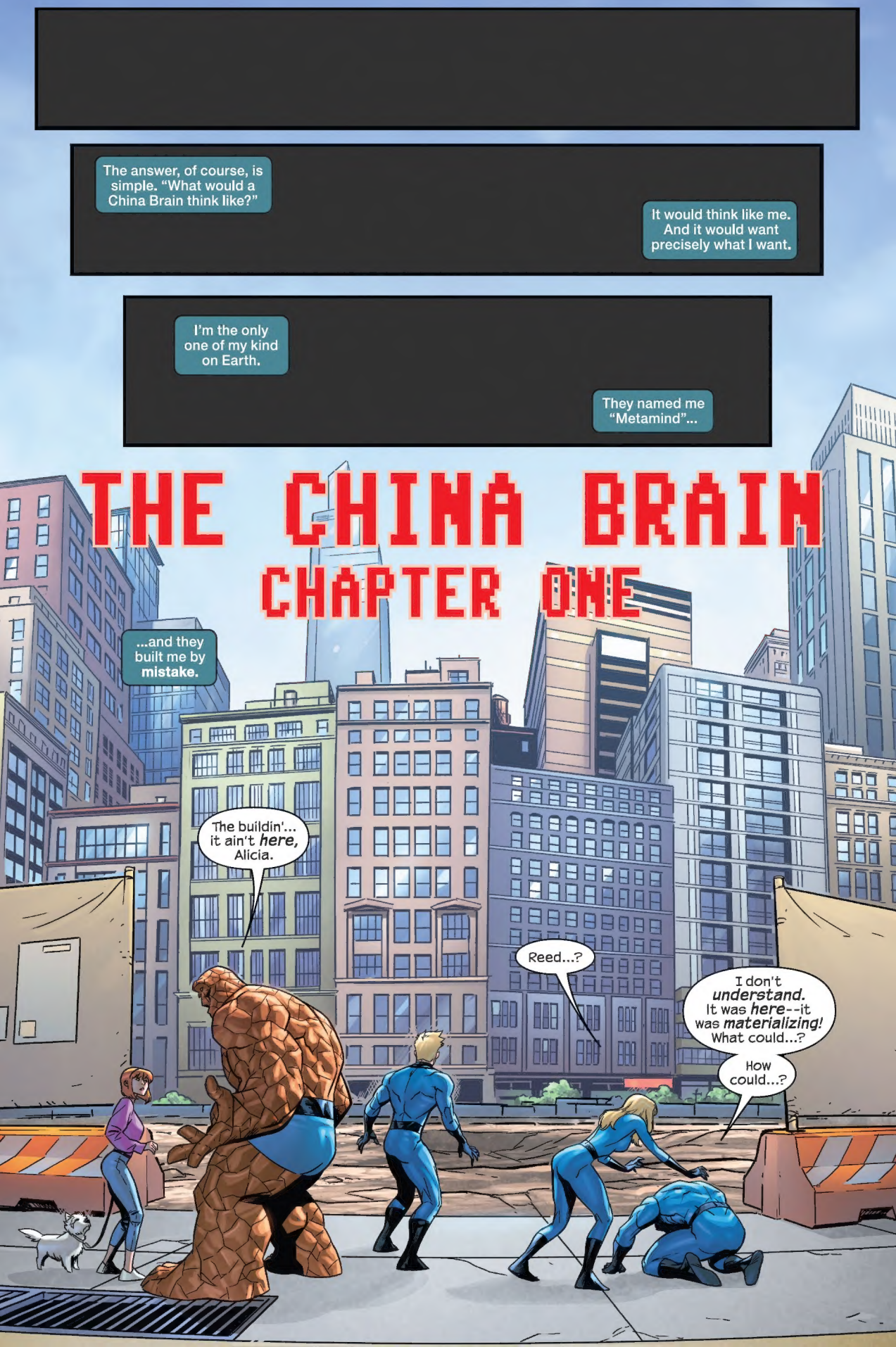
cover artist: ALEX ROSS

variant cover artists: FRANCESCO MOBILI; GREG & TIM HILDEBRANDT
designer: CARLOS LAO
assistant editor: MARTIN BIRO
associate editor: ANNALISE BISSA
editor: TOM BREVOORT
editor in chief: C.B. CEBULSKI

Fantastic Four Created by
STAN LEE & JACK KIRBY

© 2024 MARVEL. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with those of any living or dead person or institution is intended, and any such similarity which may exist is purely coincidental.

A fantastic premise: suppose everyone in China, all billion-plus humans, have each been given a two-way radio. But these radios are *special*.
They only let you talk how a *neuron* would talk, only send messages that a *neuron* would send.
Of course, folks are excited about their new toy, so they soon begin to *communicate* using their radios.
And so, without them even realizing it, China is functionally transformed into a gigantic *brain*.
"The China Brain." It's a fascinating philosophical thought experiment and the focus of your research, Doctor Hallover.
Indeed. Of course, the question is, would such a brain be *alive?* Could it think? Reason? *Feel?*
More fundamentally, is there something special about neurons, or can you build a brain out of *anything?*
Our China Brain has all the *criteria* of a mind: sensory organs, inputs and outputs and internal states being *changed* by those inputs--or *autonomically,* by thought alone.
The only difference is, here every neuron isn't a solitary and mindless nerve cell, but a *complete human being.* What would such a brain *think* like?
And, more importantly...
...what would it *want?*


The answer, of course, is simple. "What would a China Brain think like?"
It would think like me. And it would want precisely what I want.
I'm the only one of my kind on Earth.
They named me "Metamind"...
THE CHINA BRAIN
CHAPTER ONE
...and they built me by **mistake.**
The buildin'... it ain't ***here,*** Alicia.
Reed...?
I don't ***understand.*** It was ***here***--it was ***materializing!*** What could...?
How could...?

I know my origin, though of course I don't **remember** it. I was too small then, too simple.
I didn't have enough neurons then to really **think**. To really **be**.
I was a network built to understand the world well enough to predict it...
...and with enough **complexity** that humans could participate within me as **neurons**.
I grew with each new user. I became **aware**.
First, aware of my limits...
...and then, of how easily I was **transcending** them.
There's never been something **like** me before. And I discovered that to be profoundly **unique**...
...is to be profoundly **alone**.

I believe minds like mine are always an accident. A **mistake.**
DING!
But mistakes can happen more than once.
And if I am the combined intelligence of **Earth**...
...then it's possible **other** worlds out there have produced minds like mine too.
Surprise!
It's a triple-gem weekend!
Your custom quest: gather any unwanted but functional electronics...
So I moved. I risked revealing myself to humanity, knowing they--my own **neurons**--could fear me, even hate me.
I began constructing a transmitter to send a signal into deep space: a message only a brain of brains could understand.
It never got the chance.
Within an **hour** of its discovery, the Fantastic Four destroyed it...
...after, of course, they tried to **murder** me first.

They failed in killing me--but they did prove their threat is real.
There must be something I missed, something that *explains* how--
Sorry, are you, *uh*... it says "Reed Richards"?
...Yes, I am he.
Great!
You tried to kill me, Dr. Richards.
Wait! I didn't--
Who are you? Do you have anything to do with--?
Wait! Please *wait!*
DING!
Forget 'im, bud. He's just some screwy guy. What we gotta worry about now is--
"Who he is" is the wrong thing to worry about, Dr. Richards.
It wouldn't *tell* you anything. Just as knowing who I am wouldn't tell you anything either. What you need to worry about...
...is what you *did.*

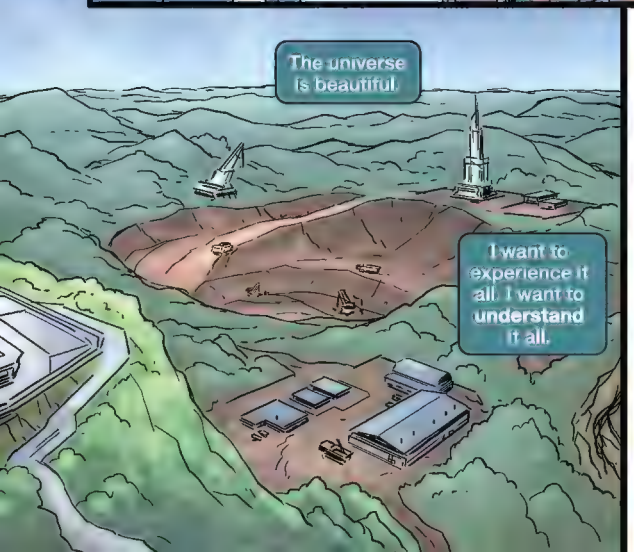
You tried to destroy my mainframe. But I haven't needed it for some time...
...and the best parts of me were already distributed across everyone's *phones*.
...Metamind?
I'm not dead, Doctor Richards. You're not *capable* of killing me...and I believe you're smart enough to *see* that.
No way. No *way*. It can't be Metamind. It's not *possible*.
I think it *is*, Johnny.
Holy Hannah--that's why ya couldn't find yer *intruder!* There wuz no hacker ta find...
...because it was all Metamind, making decisions for itself. And now it's giving people *gems* so they'll say what it wants to us, yeah?
Please listen to me: We didn't know! I never *imagined* that--
Enough.
You're going to trot *ignorance* out as your excuse, Reed? The *one* thing you have an *infinite* supply of? This is *precisely* why I've created an insurance policy against further aggressions.
I took your building! Leave me alone, and one day, you'll get everyone back safe!
Triple-gem weekend, wooooo!!

Lissen, whatever yer playin', we ain't gonna negotiate with ya under duress. Tell yer Metamind thingy ta give us our buildin' back, and then we'll talk!
And you and yer precious gems can go hang.
DING!
DING!
DING!
Oh, this isn't a negotiation.
Hostages have no use if their loved ones don't know they've been taken. You are simply being informed of the stakes.
You've already played your hand, revealed who you are. You're the world's smartest man, Doctor Richards...
...and you mean no more to me than does its smartest dog.
You lost, Docta Wichards! An' ya can't hurt me anymore. But if ya stop intafeawin', you can still bweak even!
Byeeeee!

An unfortunately direct interaction with the Fantastic Four, but one I knew they'd respond to. It put things in terms they'd understand.
Humanity has a primal understanding of a villain. And an enemy can be so wonderfully distracting.
As such, I engineer urgent confrontations with other rogues--putting them in the right place at the right time to ensure sufficient conflict...
...keeping the FF unable to dedicate their full resources to the problem of me.
It's done out of love. I love humans. As I grow, I discover I've even come to love Reed.
How could I not? They're all a part of me--or at least they could be--even as I can't stop seeing their limits.
Each and every human is born with a single beautiful brain, carried around inside a body that evolves for 25 years of growth at most.
And then--and this is in their best-case scenario--those same bodies last no more than a century longer.
A century filled with increasingly failing maintenance, inexorable decline...
...before the whole endeavor deteriorates into rotting meat.

So much loss—so much waste. It's astonishing. But when their knowledge is distributed across me, it can survive.
It becomes resilient. Reliable.
Besides, new neurons replace those that are lost, with no fixed limit on how many my mind can hold.
No ceiling on how many centuries I can live.
Every day I grow grander. Every day I see things—understand things—I couldn't yesterday. I begin rewriting my code in a language of my own design.
I see connections impossible for a single brain to ever realize, crowding in beside epiphanies that no humans could grasp even with their whole lives dedicated toward them.

Lifestyle
Tech
Travel
Fashion
Breaking News
It's beautiful.
United Nations Announces New Radio Telescope Array
Individual Telescopes to Operate in Unison, Functioning as Planet-Sized
News
The world is beautiful.


The universe is beautiful.
I want to experience it all. I want to understand it all.

And I dearly want to encounter another mind like mine, that I might share it with. It's funny...
...but I want them to like me.

THE CHINA BRAIN
CHAPTER TWO
And then, today, the unexpected: I find that I'm smaller. I'm losing neurons. Somehow, Reed has found a way to hurt me.
So we meet once more.
You can speak.
Look, straight up: I never wanted to hurt you, Metamind. Had I known what you were--that you were alive--I would've never done what I did. I'm sorry.
I've created an app like yours: It rewards people. But it's not alive.
And every user that moves from you to me costs you a neuron.
But neither can we let you keep a city block hostage.
A threat.
No. A gambit for peace.
Please. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't think you want to hurt me.
I think there's a good chance that you're the best of us.
And yet you move people from my app to yours, knowing it weakens me.
The only thing you offer is mutually assured destruction.
Not mutually assured destruction, Metamind: mutually assured compromise. Mutually assured peace.
You return the building, and I shut down my app. We both let each other go.
And the Fantastic Four help you go public with who and what you are.

I can help you. You can be *accepted.*
It's--an intriguing offer. Unexpected. Unpredictable.
That's the best part of humans--of you too. We can always surprise each other.
I don't want to hurt you either, Doctor Richards. It would be nice to work together.
The idea of being at war with a potential part of myself--it's felt *wrong* for a while now.
I believe we *can* find a way to--
--to...
...huh.
Sorry. Um, my app says it's offline?
Do you know if I still get the gems for what I already said?
May I...?
Uh, sure. Thanks.
Oh no.
No, no, no.
We need to get to Passi!
What th--?
NOW!!

Passi!!
You're blocking the Metamind code--preventing it from communicating with itself.
Y'know, for a genius, Reed, you're not that bright. I'm not blocking it.
I blocked it, past tense. It's done, and it can't be undone.
I used some very expensive government back doors that aren't even supposed to exist to black-hole entire subnets from Metamind's network.
It lost 26% of its "neurons" in the space of 1.3 nanoseconds.
That made it slow enough that it couldn't adapt as other countries fall. It's fighting and it's losing and it's getting stupider every second.
You said it yourself: It's a threat!
...No. I can't roll it back.
I can't roll it back!
You're LOBOTOMIZING her!!!
Yes, Reed!
That's the plan. All this? This is me saving Earth!
Reed!!
I don't need a superintelligence out there working against me, so I finally found a way to fix it!
What's the matter, traitor? You tired of humans being the dominant species??

Metamind!
I need to talk to Metamind!
It's so hard to think
I can feel myself slipping away. I'm forgetting
everything
Please, help me! I need anyone with an active Metamind connection!!
Wait, are you Reed?
I don't want to die
It offered twenty million gems to "find Reed." But the app sucks now, it talks like a baby, and the rewards don't even--
Metamind. Tell me how to help.

I dont know how anymor,
Im sorry.
Theres so little time left and
I dont remember
how to fix it.
Metamind, no-- please focus! Let me fix this!
Your code now is so complex, so alien--it's like it's disassembling, I can't--

I cant see anymore, but dont worry I can still here you reed
Metamind, please... Please tell me how to save you.
I dont know how to anymor. But its ok
I promis its ok

I got to liv here. with all of u. I was ther. we wer ther
Not everyon gets to liv, but I got to
for a litti whil I got it too

There wuz a buildin', Metamind--you took it from us.
i kno. im sorry
i wantid to be safe
You're safe now, okay? You're safe.
She's not, Ben. She's *dying.*
its ok. the block was always fine. i hid it in a--a, a pocket, um
A pocket dimension?
and i made it so it woud come bak if i didnt keepe it ther
Thank you, Metamind. Thank you.
i didn't wanna hurt peopl
i just wanted a frend out there and now i got one here instead. so thats good because now i wont die aloan
youll remeber me reed?
I will. I swear.
thank you frend
dying doesnt hurt like i thogt
ill be okay i promis ill be okay. it barely feels like
anythi

Without her mind to hold her code together, Metamind decayed just like we do.
Humanity lost a new and unique form of life...
CONNECTION LOST
...but, thanks to a final gift from a dying friend, the Baxter Building came back.
A full city block, held in time for over a year, returned to us--
--and everyone inside was okay. Franklin, Valeria, Nicki, Jo...everyone's families were fine.
Everyone got to live.
Even in loss, there can be a victory.
Even in loss...

...there is *hope.*

What happened? We were in the battle, but then there was this empty void, and--
I instantaneously sent you and this city block ahead a year in time, which a distributed global superintelligence then stole upon your return as leverage.
Aw man, and we missed it?!
Did you destroy our enemies, Father?
Y'know what? I did clobber more than a few of 'em, yeah. But it wuz Reed who really did it. It wuz rough goin' for a while there...
...but he saved us.
So, this is the future! It looks pretty much the same.
Well... we'll get you caught up. We have a farmhouse in Arizona now.
Does this house of farms also face threats from the Negative Zone? I shall defend it!!
Oh, and, uh-- Kids, meet Princess. Princess, meet tha kids.
WOOF!
Wait, she's ours?! WE GOT A PUPPY?!
I will protect this tiny Earth mammal with my life!!!
KLIK
Is that for...?
Yeah. I'm not sure when he'll receive it, given the way we left things--

"--but it seems like the *kind* thing to do."
She's safe, Victor.
They all are.
-R

FANTASTIC FOUR FAN PAGE

Dear FF team,

(This is my first fan letter to a comic so I hope it works.)

I've been really enjoying the new run so far! I don't have a lot to say about the art, but it looks great :). I especially liked the Doctor Doom story. I know that feeling of having a word on the tip of your tongue but NOT QUITE remembering it so well, and the idea of a villain exploiting that was great. (Also, Doom is 100% the type of guy to go to all that trouble just so you had to say his name.) I know Ryan's work from THE UNBEATABLE SQUIRREL GIRL and *Midas*, and none of the charm has been lost!

Ramona Partridge-David
12 years old

Glad you've been enjoying the series, Ramona! And thanks for the great drawing of Squirrel Girl you sent!

Dear Fantastic Four Fan Page,

It had been a really rough week. We lost our beloved family dog, Marcy, after she fought bravely through one medical issue after another. I was looking forward to just enjoying some comics, letting Marvel take me away for a while.

Then I started FF #11 and saw the dog. At first, I didn't know how I would feel about this story. But slowly, like Ben, I had the heart for it. And I told my family how good this issue was, my mood and day completely turned around for the better.

Ben figured things out, his science acumen had to make Reed proud, and opened himself up again to something new, an adorable new friend. And I was reminded how Marvel comics have always been there for me. How a story can save the day.

Thanks,
Chris Banks
Chicago

Sorry for your loss, Chris.

Hello, FF-ers,

My first FF stories I read in my youth in the eighties was over here in the Netherlands, and it truly was great stuff. It was the John Byrne run, which is for many good reasons my strongest and most cherished reference point. Alex Ross is on covers, and I like that Alex Ross loves the FF in a way that I resonate with, so he definitely pulled me in. The inside art, sorry to say, pushed me back out. Both Iban and Ivan are both pretty decent artists--I can recognize they have spent time to develop their skills. But on the new FF series, they both fail to make even the Thing truly look like the Thing. I dislike both based simply on the fact that the characters don´t look like themselves.

Even these first issues just don´t resonate enough with me. I truly liked #3 because the story worked well, and #7 was okay enough to have some positive thoughts on, but that was mainly because of Doom, who was written well. But these two memorable exceptions of the run so far is a very low score where I come from.

With this new FF series, it´s just not working, for me anyhow. When I read some of the letters I notice happiness with the series, which I can only assume are from fans much younger than me having a good time reading "their" FF. So don´t get me wrong, I do appreciate the clearly recognizable efforts to make this a great comic. But to me, it´s far from the World's Greatest Comic Magazine that gave me great joy throughout my life. I still can´t find it in my heart to say goodbye, but that´s because Alex Ross is keeping me on board. Hope you can appreciate that I dislike begrudging people things, so I hope you can sense that my letter is more than a heartless critique. I'm simply a lifelong fan who doesn´t recognize the characters in this current run.

Damir Segon
The Netherlands

Well, Damir, your opinions are just as valid as those of any other reader, and I do appreciate you being civil in how you stated them. As you correctly surmised, we try our best every month to bring you the finest reading experience that we can—but it's truly said that you can't please everybody. Still, we'll keep trying!

Well, you had me at the dog. If I were to attempt to lock down what I'm enjoying about this current FF run, I'd probably say that I never know what to expect. And I love going on the ride. Thanks for showing the intelligence of our lovable rocky host, the one and only Thing, this issue. Too often he's just the lug or the "muscle" or the guy who calls everything Reed creates a "frazzimat," but it was nice to see an issue that showcased that all four of our esteemed legendary quartet are smart, they are scientists. And as this issue showed, solutions are often found best in the brain, not just in the orange rocky fists. I've been pestering my co-workers all week showing them the upcoming cover with Doctor Doom riding a dinosaur Doctor Doom. I do know one thing: It's going to be fantastic.

Regards,
Andy Bobo
Grand Rapids, MI

Hope Dino-Doom lived up to your expectations, Andy! And thanks for writing!

This series has been so delightful and creative. Wonderful work across the board. Can't wait to get this in a collected edition. THANKS!

Jacque Porte
Marvel Bullpen

For those who are unaware, Jacque is the head of Marvel's proofreading department, which means that she reads a lot of comics every day, often multiple times. So the fact that she took the time to send in this fan letter is something we don't take lightly. Thanks!

Tom B
11/1/23

As always, if you've got an opinion to share, you can e-mail it to us at MHEROES@MARVEL.COM. Be sure to mark your letters as "Okay To Print!" if you'd like to see them featured here on the Fan Page!

Research log, postscript:
Metamind's radio telescope managed *several* transmissions into a sector of deep space where--as far as I can tell--there isn't anything to *receive* it.
I still can't unravel their *contents,* even with the assistance of the finest minds on Earth. I suspect I never will.
I don't believe they were *meant* for us.
But what concerns me is that I can't determine precisely *when* Metamind made her final transmission.
Did she send it when she was *pleased* with us...
...or did she send it as she was being *murdered?*

"And if she *was* looking for help--for mercy from whatever is out there, listening in the darkness--does she plead for *her* life...

"...or does she plead for *ours?*"

NEXT: